The role of development agents in territorial observatories : lessons to be learned from the "SIG Pyrénées" experience

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The role of development agents in territorial observatories : lessons to be learned from the "SIG Pyrénées" experience[1].

The "SIG Pyrénées" is a socio-economic observatory of the Pyrenees Mountains. It has been gradually established over the last ten years by the Pyrenees Association for Mountain Economics (Assemblée Pyrénéenne d'Economie Montagnarde or APEM), an association created by the different consular structures[2] of the Pyrenees Mountains. We will analyse it in its capacity as a territorial observatory, that is, an instrument used by territorial development stakeholders to produce and share information (socio-economic data) for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of public action (in other words, the quest for a better utilisation of public action and the construction of an action tool). After providing a description of the evolution of French territorial development policies and, more particularly, Pyrenees Mountain policy, we will analyse the role of development agents considered here as decision support professionals, in the establishment and coordination of territorial observatories.

1. Transformation of public policies and the role of territorial public action instruments
    a. Evolution of territorial development policies in France

From the historical point of view, the government has been the key actor in land-use planning in France. After having planned and organised the reconstruction of the country after the end of World War II, it created many institutions, including the emblematic agency for regional policy, DATAR[3], in 1963. In the 1960s, it applied the principles of solidarity and equality between regions through the active involvement of its local government agencies. In the 1970s, after actions motivated by economic growth, the government no longer had the same capacity to intervene in regional policy as a result of the economic crisis. Little by little, its role changed. It became a regional partner while remaining the agent of developmental action. In the 1980s, the first local development initiatives emerged. Decentralisation laws were characteristic of the reorganisation of the rural development infrastructure in France. According to these laws, the government delegated responsibilities to regional government agencies : communes, general and regional councils. At the same time that decentralisation was taking place, the government was establishing zoning policies. These policies were designed to provide support for regions with structural difficulties, linked in part to geographical criteria. The French Mountain Law that went into effect in 1985 well illustrates this policy that led to the establishment of a specific institutional and technical infrastructure in all

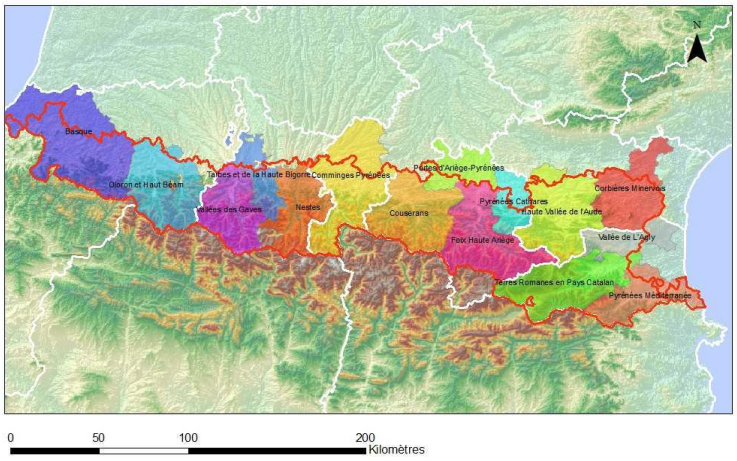
[1] This paper falls within the framework of a geography thesis that received a CIFRE grant with the APEM.

[2] Groupings of departmental chambers of agriculture, departmental chambers of trades and departmental chambers of commerce and industry.

[3] Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale.

of the French mountain regions, including the Pyrenees. In the 1990s, the grouping of communes around a common project led to the emergence of new public, intercommunal cooperation establishments. The logic of the territorial project and contractualisation was officialised by the LOADT[4] of 1995 that introduced the concept of "pays" (or project territories). The area concerned by the project was left to the initiative of the stakeholders and was not a mandatory grouping. The Pyrenees Mountains are entirely covered by these entities, representing 14 territories, inclusive, for over half of the mountain zone.

Les pays du massif - 2009
Source: SIG Pyrénées



The past decade reinforced decentralisation and saw the emergence of new injunctions : the requirements of sustainable development and competitiveness. As underscored by Debarbieux and Vanier (2002), the French paradigm is no longer effective at the regional level today. The increase in the number of territories and of territorial development stakeholders since the decentralisation laws were passed in France, as well as the proliferation of tools to promote the implementation of regional policies, require the interconnection and the systematisation of the large quantity of data produced at the level of these new regions. In fact, the production of knowledge shared by these territories today represents a strategic challenge for making decisions that are negotiated, well-thought-out, transparent and effective.

New development challenges and the necessity of evaluating projects and coordinating actions between actors within the project territories all contribute to the increasing concerns linked to territorial observation. The creation and management of territorial observatories require the use of data processing technologies to assist regional policy stakeholders and professionals in their constant quest for information. The main purpose of these observatories is to provide decision support – to obtain territory-related knowledge that will lead to better-informed decisions. They collect and diffuse information, knowledge and know-how. They increase exchanges between professionals and support the accumulation of local expertise, mainly through the mobilisation of research. The use of information derived from these technologies requires new practices for development agents who gradually integrate them into their professional practices. Some authors refer to a territorial information system (Bertacchini, 2006), defining it as a socio-technical information and communication instrument, multi-level and multi-stakeholder, in support of a territorial intelligence process.

The transformation of public policies also raises the question of the role of instruments in territorial governance. The main hypothesis of the sociology of public action (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007)

[4] Loi d'Orientation pour l'Aménagement et le Développement du Territoire (Directive law concerning territorial planning and development).

postulates that “the creation of a public policy instrument may serve to reveal a more profound change in public policy—in its meaning, in its cognitive and normative framework, and in its results”. We would like to add that the creation of instruments also reveals transformations in the roles of professionals involved in local public action development. Using the definition of Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004), we propose the following definition of a territorial public action instrument : it is both a technical and social tool that organises the roles of the stakeholders involved (regional government agencies, associations, private stakeholders) within the framework of territorial development.

b. The case of mountain policy

The law of 9 January 1985, known as the “Mountain Law”, related to the development and protection of the mountain, came late to France. For a long time, no distinction between spaces was made within the framework of French regional development. Legislation was unitary on principle. This law therefore represented a major policy change, accompanied by an important institutional framework. In order to define and establish these policies, different tools and stakeholder groups were gradually defined : the Pyrenees Mountain Development Office, the Pyrenees Mountain Development Committee, the Pyrenees Network[5] and interregional agreements and land-use plans.

The government is represented in the Pyrenees region by the Pyrenees Mountain Development Office, created in 1975. The main job of generalist civil servants who work there is to coordinate mountain policy. They are also responsible for the coordination and the secretariat of the different administrative bodies of the Pyrenees Mountain region. Created by the Mountain Law, the Pyrenees Mountain Development Committee is a cooperative body that brings together representatives of regional government agencies (regional councils, general councils, local government agencies) and of the association sector, as well as socioprofessionals. It is co-chaired by the coordinating prefect of the Pyrenees region and the president of the Standing Committee of the Pyrenees Mountain Development Committee. The Standing Committee is a body devoted to reflection and coordination within the Pyrenees Mountain Development Committee. A technical body also exists to implement mountain policy : the Interregional Planning Committee. This committee is responsible for processing and presenting documents requesting national and/or European financing. To meet the challenges involved in the development of the Pyrenees Mountains, some of these structures have been in existence for almost 30 years. Since the 1990s, these structures, with their interregional scope at the level of the Pyrenees Mountains, are grouped together under the term, “Pyrenees Network”. This network consists of eight structures, including the APEM, with different statuses, missions and work forces. The Pyrenees Network includes professionals from the tourism, agriculture, agri-food, business and trade sectors, as well as stakeholders involved in training and development and the information and communication technologies (equipment and uses).

Land-use plans are prospective policy documents on the future of the Pyrenees Mountains. These include the Pyrenees Development and Policy Plan (1977), followed by the Pyrenees Interregional Land-use and Development Plan (2006). Interregional agreements concerning the Pyrenees Mountains, signed between the government and the three regional councils (Aquitaine, Midi-Pyrénées and the Languedoc Roussillon), for 2000/2006 and then 2007/2013, offer a multi-sectorial approach to development in the Pyrenees. These agreements are the financial tools that make it possible to clearly identify the policies defined in the Pyrenees land-use plans. As a result of its zoning policy component that recognises the specificity of a mountain region, this policy in favour of mountain development created an institutional framework specific to each French mountain range. This framework took shape as a result of the emergence of new groups of stakeholders

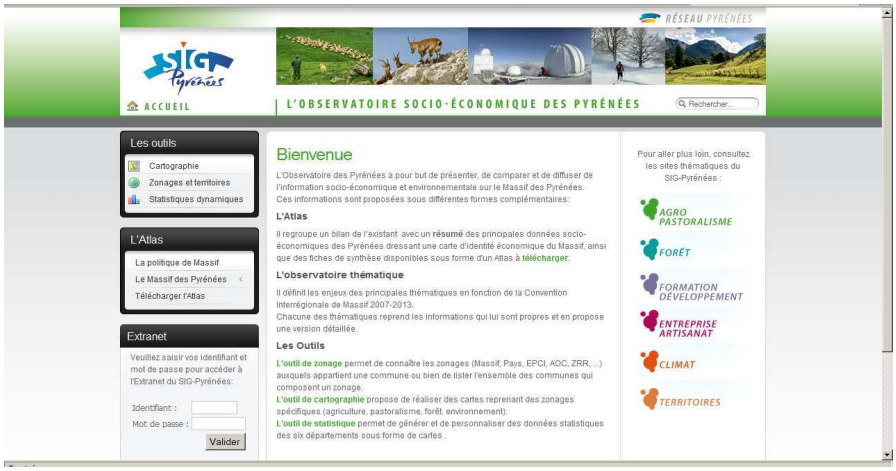
[5] Network of organisms and know-how devoted to the development of mountain regions in the Pyrenees : http://www.reseaupyrenees.net/.

responsible for establishing policies and as a result of the production of ad hoc policies adapted to each specific system. Concerning the Pyrenees Mountains, the arrival of this institutional framework within a pre-existing stakeholder system undergoing major changes revealed the necessity of an interrelationship between geographic scales (transborder, mountain, regional, departmental, etc.) and of development stakeholders. This is what the APEM proposes through the implementation of the SIG Pyrénées.

We will see that the mountain observatory was established little by little, one building block at a time, leading to a certain convergence in the expectations of the different stakeholders in relation to this instrument. According to Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004), different types of instruments exist : legislative and regulatory, economic and fiscal, agreement-based and incentive-based, and information-based and communication-based. The SIG Pyrénées is in the category of information-based and communication-based instruments. It is both a bearer of values (information sharing, effectiveness of public action, etc.), and a tool for maintaining a constant exchange of information and communication between stakeholders. The SIG Pyrénées made it possible to structure relationships between the different stakeholders of the Pyrenees institutional system. The observatory brings together stakeholders from different scales in order to provide them with the possibility of exchanging ideas about and objectifying their goals. However, the instrument may produce “a specific representation of the issue it is handling" (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004). In fact, technical tools are not neutral. As a model of a reality, they tend to be oversimplified. They thus have a built-in description grid of the social context, contribute to the categorisation of the situation addressed, and provide a framework for the choice of public policies to be implemented. The communities of experts, builders and promoters of the instrument, and the APEM in particular, are at the origin of this description of the social context (particularly through the themes of the SIG Pyrénées).

2. Establishment of an observatory and creation of a competence centre : the experience of the APEM

This association has been supported for the past 12 years by the consular structures of the Pyrenees Mountains. The aim of the APEM is to contribute to the economic development of the regions lying within the Pyrenees Mountains. “The APEM constitutes a link between techniques and territories, by relying on the know-how of its partners in the Pyrenees Network”[6]. To fulfil this aim, the APEM created an observatory encompassing the entire area : a tool known as the SIG Pyrénées. From the beginning, this tool has been dedicated to issues concerning economic mountain development.



a. Construction by successive building blocks of the SIG Pyrénées

6 http://www.apem.asso.fr/menuapempres/nos-objectifs-et-nos-missions.html

The observatory developed by the APEM (referred to interchangeably as the SIG Pyrénées or the Pyrenees Mountain Observatory) is broken down into several themes corresponding in part to the issues facing the current mountain interregional agreement. These themes include agropastoralism, the climate, the regions covered by the Pyrenees Mountains, business-trade, the forest and training-development[7]. The collaborative work tool, still called Extranet, was built with personalised interfaces and the management of different user profiles to ensure data privacy (administrator, contributor, simple user). It proposes a collaborative work space ("file cabinet", forums, directory). The observatory operates on the principle of Web 2.0: users are contributors. The objective for APEM through this observatory is to develop a knowledge base shared among the stakeholders, at the service of mountain development.

Its construction took place in several stages. The preliminary study of the socio-economic observatory of the Pyrenees was carried out in 1998 by the APEM at the request of DATAR. In 1999, the association adopted a pastoral survey of the Pyrenees to build the first component of the observatory. Until 2002, the APEM developed, with its agricultural partner of the Pyrenees Network, the agropastoral theme of the SIG Pyrénées ; this was considered to be the emergence phase. Between 2003 and 2005, the APEM provided data processing services to different partners, so that it gradually became known by the partners of the Pyrenees Network and by its board of directors as an authority on issues concerning the use of new technologies in the Pyrenees. In 2006 and 2007, a strategic plan was drawn up in support of the APEM project for the new mountain policy planning period, 2007-2013. The period when activities and financing were assessed was one of re-evaluation, particularly of the associative status. The French government, Europe and the three regions then financed the SIG Pyrénées, thus recognising the legitimacy of the APEM in its role as a producer of socio-economic data. In 2008, the APEM extended its scope to include the research community through a CIFRE contract. The subject of the thesis[8] is indicative of a new direction in APEM activities towards territorial issues. Since 2008, the APEM has therefore launched a new development phase through the gradual implementation of a strategic plan and the extension of internal know-how to the structure.

The APEM team has therefore undergone a considerable evolution since the beginnings of the association when only the current director was on salary. With an experienced geographer specialised both in mountain development (DESS in transborder mountain development) and in the geographic information sciences applied to regional development (Master's degree in localised information systems for territorial development – SILAT) at the reins, APEM's role was defined. People are hired on the basis of two criteria : the desire to form a pluridisciplinary team that uses different know-how, and to participate in the construction of territorial observations. The need to develop services at a given moment in the life of the association led to the search for data processing know-how. In 2006, the association counted three full-time job equivalents : a computer specialist (DESS in georeferencing information sciences for a Master's degree in the environment and territorial development – SIGMA), a specialist in environment/agriculture and a geographer. Little by little, the association grew by successively hiring a data administrator, a Web geomatician-developer, an agronomist working on a geography thesis, and an ergonomist (DESS in the cognitive sciences and the man-machine interface). In October 2009, the team changed as the result of the departure of the geomatician and the data administrator. A new management assistant was hired following the association's relocation (professional degree, "Development, Coordination and Mediation of Rural Areas"). Finally, a project leader was hired, a graduate of the Institute of Political Studies of Toulouse (with a DESS in development project management). His mission is to insure the follow-up of APEM projects as well as the coordination of thematic groups of the SIG Pyrénées.

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[7] To access thematic observatories: http://sig-pyrenees.net/

[8] Territorial observatories and the reorganisation of territorial engineering : analysis of transformations in the know-how of development agents in the Pyrenees Mountains.

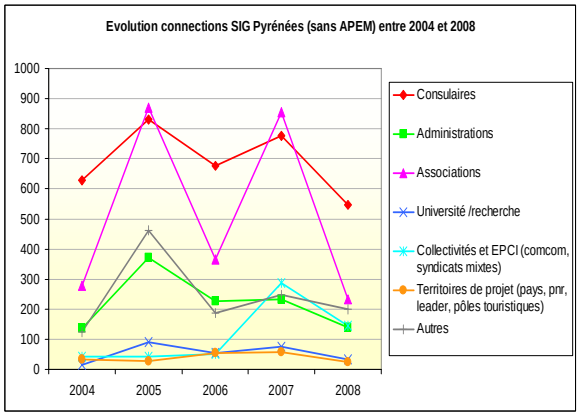
Since the main characteristic of territorial observatories is the spatialisation of data and territorial issues, it could seem obvious that the experts who handle the geographic information technologies are particularly apt to adopt these tools. However, as soon as the observatory is perceived as a public action instrument that favours stakeholder networking, other know-how must be taken into consideration. In fact, since an observatory involves many roles (project manager, coordinator, data administrator, etc.), it would be difficult for a single agent to fill all these roles. That is why it appears necessary to share know-how between development agents of the same territory or of the same structure. The presence of an active, specific action system facilitates the establishment and the use of a regional observatory. The question that also arises is that of how to make the transition from shared know-how to the construction of a collective know-how.

The APEM was built on a proposal of information sharing at the level of the Pyrenees Mountains, requiring a pluridisciplinary team. We showed that there was an increase in the number of levels and territorial development stakeholders, encouraged by the specificity of the institutional Pyrenees infrastructure. This revealed the increasing need for interrelationships and, therefore, a place for a stakeholder like the APEM. In short, the association staked its future on the hope that information sharing would be an added value for territorial development.

b. The observatory, a tool for redistributing know-how?

Potential beneficiaries of the APEM are extremely varied : consular chambers, associations, the Pyrenees Network, the DATAR Pyrenees, local government agencies, joint unions, etc.

An initial analysis of connections to the SIG Pyrénées Extranet and their evolution gives us an idea of who uses the mountain observatory. Users of the SIG Pyrénées are very diverse, but the most representative in terms of the number of connections are the consular chambers (technicians). Associations and local government agencies such as the former DDA constitute the second group of users of the SIG Pyrénées. Between 2004 and 2008, a big increase in the number of connections from regional government agencies was observed.



We can distinguish two types of Extranet uses : as a collaborative work tool that is used from time to time for a specific project, or as a collaborative work support tool for an ongoing theme. The Extranet is therefore used on a regular basis (between 150 and 220 individual visitors per year) while projects are being carried out. In 2009, only people involved in ongoing themes (agropastoralism and trades) used its services. This evolution can be explained in part by the fact that since 2009, the APEM has changed its strategy by setting up Internet sites devoted to each theme of the SIG Pyrénées. Approximately 80% of the information is now available through these sites whereas, in the past, it was necessary to connect to the SIG Pyrénées server.
A questionnaire was sent out and posted on the APEM site in 2009 to learn more about its users. It revealed that it is mainly used by professionals, with particular emphasis on cartography. The Extranet is especially used for its “file cabinet” feature that allows shared archiving and the storage of heavy documents. Although this function is frequently used, it is considered not to be very ergonomic. The use of other functions such as the forum or the directory is marginal, when it is known at all. Work is presently in progress to replace the Extranet with a collaborative tool with

similar functions in a more ergonomic environment. The questionnaire also revealed that the tool does not live up to all of its expectations : data updating, adapting data for professional use, data processing specific to the mountain context, valorisation of projects carried out in the Pyrenees, etc.

We can therefore see how a competence centre developed within the APEM, to be eventually used by Pyrenees development stakeholders : technicians from consular chambers, followed by administrative and regional development agents. Moreover, the association's scope is not limited to data collection for a geographic information system. The competence centre formed within the APEM team is, in fact, involved in other tasks that may include activities such as the organisation of a seminar between members of the Pyrenees Network and the territories involved in a project, training/information days on free software, the creation of Internet sites or dedicated data processing tools for the partners Pyrenees Network, etc. The APEM provides support for its partners for the adoption and use of new technologies, thus opening a perspective of interrelationships between the geographic scales of the Pyrenees.

The association has gradually immerged as an important actor to encourage and organise data sharing in the Pyrenees, especially by the intermediary of new technologies. After an initial "tool development" stage, the APEM concentrated its efforts on promoting the approach to its partners. The Pyrenees Mountain Observatory can be seen as a new instrument of regional public action at the service of mountain policy. By analysing the creation of the APEM and the SIG Pyrénées, we have seen the necessity of developing a collective know-how to be able to maintain an observatory within a structure, and to have the capacity to federate stakeholders and different institutions outside of the structure. The increase in the number of territorial development stakeholders, the situation of shared decision-making in the production of public policies, and the need for reactivity of stakeholders faced with new mechanisms for managing public action (calls for proposals) force development agents to develop their strategies in terms of a specific region. These strategies can benefit today from data collected by the regional observatories, observatories that require the establishment of a pluridisciplinary expert system.

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